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TOPICS

The Kennedy Mystery Reopened

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The Warren Commission consisted of seven men, any one of whom you would trust with your wrist-watch. In (almost imperceptible) descending order of unimpeachability, they were: Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the US; John J. McCloy, former High Commissioner for Germany and President of the World Bank; Allen Dulles, former Director of the CIA; Senators John Sherman Cooper (Republican) of Kentucky and Richard Russell (Democrat) of Georgia; and Representatives Hale Boggs of Louisiana, the Democratic Whip, and Gerald Ford of Michigan, the Republican Conference Chairman. It was the kind of list someone might bury in a time capsule at a world's fair, to show future generations who had embodied all that was noble, wise, responsible and powerful in America in that era. The seven had the task of determining exactly what happened in the hour after noon of 22 November 1963 in Dallas, Texas. Whatever else they might have done, they botched that job.

It is now almost two years since the commission, after a 10-month investigation, published its report on the assassination of President Kennedy, and released 26 volumes of testimony and exhibits. The question which was raised from the very beginning still remains: was Lee Harvey Oswald the lone assassin? For a long time it was not a very popular question to ask. Richard N. Goodwin, one of President Kennedy's assistants, has dismissed the early critics as 'demonologists, charlatans and self-promoters'. Now, all of a sudden, the seeds of doubt have blossomed, and Mr Goodwin, among others, finds himself a questioner, although of a more respectable category. Magazines and newspapers are full of revised histories of the assassination; there are demands from rather impressive sources that the investigation be reopened.

The proximate cause of the fuss is a thin book, called *Inquest*, by a young graduate student, Edward Jay Epstein. In what began as a master's thesis in political science, Epstein's book shows the extent of the commission's sloppiness, prejudice and unwisdom. Not one member or staff assistant ever read or heard all the testimony; the commissioners were only sporadically in attendance at hearings; the five senior lawyers drifted out of the investigation to return to their lucrative private practices before the report was written; one junior lawyer had to assemble all the material on the actual assassination; there was political pressure to get the report on supermarket bookstands before the 1964 elections.

More seriously, the commission and most of its staff were deeply committed to the only comfortable theory of the assassination - that it was the work of one demented man. The most pervasive myth in America is the delusion of innocence: we are essentially a benevolent, generous, sincere, straight-forward folk whose errors are those of inexperience, guilelessness and eagerness. Americans cannot conceive of themselves as conspirators (despite the tactics of corporations, the mafia, the CIA and the FBI, and the torturous, if legalised, dealings of politicians).

Perhaps out of such delusions, the commission took great pains to construct a theory of the assassination completely in accordance with its members' basic beliefs about America. When the general counsel, J. Lee Rankin (a former member of the Eisenhower administration), heard stories that Oswald might be an FBI informer, he presented a statement to the commission: 'We do have a dirty rumour that is very bad for the commission . . . and it is very damaging to the agencies that are involved in it and it must be wiped out . . .' Not by examining its source (that witness was never called), but by letting Mr J. Edgar Hoover, the well-known archetype of the guileless, benevolent American, deny it all. The very peculiar fact that the name of an FBI agent was in Oswald's address book - and was deleted from the FBI's official list of the book's contents - was explained by Hoover: 'The circumstances under which (the) name, etcetera, appeared in Oswald's notebook were fully known to the FBI.' So much for that: the investigation was closed. Later, Mr Warren told a reporter that some facts of the assassination might never be known 'in your lifetime'. It is not difficult to see how a commission concerned about damage to the FBI image (the assumption being that there are no FBI informers) would be inclined to treat 'dirty' evidence casually - if it were not determined to withhold it altogether.

By its very composition the commission was almost certain to produce an inadequate report. The members all reached their rank and status in the US by closing doors, eliminating doubts, shoring up the American mythology. The commission had a political job to do, to establish one more or less plausible version of the assassination events as an official 'truth'. No matter that the conflict in evidence about the bullet paths in the President's body has never been resolved; that the case for a lone assassin rests on the unlikely hypothesis that a single bullet could

(the Governor still maintains he was shot seconds after Kennedy was hit, and a film record bears out this story): or that there is reliable testimony that 'Oswald' was often seen in two places at the same time in the months before the assassination (suggesting, as Professor Richard H. Popkin has done, that a 'double' was being employed by putative conspirators). When junior staff members began to explore such problems, they were called off by Rankin and the commissioners.

Doubts about the Warren investigation exist on several levels. Mr Goodwin cannot believe that Oswald was not the lone assassin, but he would like the commission's shoddy work patched up. 'If we cannot deny this book,' Goodwin said in a review last Sunday in *Book Week*, 'then the investigation must be reopened if we wish to approach the truth more closely.' Epstein's attack is mainly directed against the commission, but it also contains disquieting material for an alternative theory of conspiracy. Harold Weisberg's discursive and frequently strident book, *Whitewash*, charges that the commission deliberately suppressed evidence.

Popkin's long and detailed article, in the current *New York Review of Books*, builds a delicious, Hitchcockian plot of four conspirators working to force a US *démarche* against Cuba. Others, not surprisingly from among the most disaffected elements in the country, would like to implicate everyone in authority in a massive national conspiracy.

So far there is evidence for only modest revisionism. But even so, if the Warren commissioners are exposed as merely hapless dupes, other doubts about American history over the last two decades become more pertinent. Was the Rosenberg case also a fraud? The FBI's role then was every bit as curious as it is in the Oswald business. Was the whole US position on the origins of the cold war fraudulent? John McCloy and Allen Dulles had the same job in feeding the national mythology then as they did by 'wiping out' the 'dirty rumours' in the assassination investigation and preventing 'damage' to shining images.

Already the Warren Commission report is beginning to be a political issue. Goodwin is more or less a member of the Kennedy government-in-exile. Others of like politics are worried about the flaws in the report. Although there is no evidence that Robert Kennedy has yet taken any interest in the matter, the continuing doubts will certainly increase his distance from the Johnson administration. The demand for a new investigation may become loud enough to affect the 1968 election campaign. That hour in Dallas may yet survive to haunt us for generations to come.